

AGRICULTURE AND LAND USE

WHY FARMERS NEED TO CARE ABOUT COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING

If communities have not started already, they may soon be preparing comprehensive land use plans to satisfy Wisconsin's comprehensive planning, or "Smart Growth" law. Community leaders and others responsible for developing a local land use plan want to involve as many citizens as possible in the various parts of developing a land use plan. Not only is this good public policy, it's a requirement of the new comprehensive planning law.

There are many reasons why farmers should participate in local land use planning. Farmers are typically among the largest landholders in rural communities. They understand firsthand the challenges to the future of farming, including development pressures in the countryside. Because many community members involved in planning are unfamiliar with farming, it is especially important that farmers educate their neighbors about the value of farming and help push for more farm-friendly policies and programs.

PLANNING THAT MATTERS

Wisconsin's "Smart Growth" law strengthened the process for land use planning in several ways. In the past, communities had no strong incentive to use their plans to develop policies or ordinances. Under the new law, local land use decisions will need to be consistent with a comprehensive plan. The new law also requires that each comprehensive plan cover elements such as economic development, natural and agricultural resources, housing, and transportation.

Farmers should be encouraged by these changes. Some may fear that planning opens the door to new regulation, imposed by outside interests. However, if properly implemented, the planning process asks local stakeholders to make their own decisions about what their community will look like in the future, and what tools can best accomplish those goals. In short, comprehensive planning will deal with issues farmers care about.

FARMING IS IMPORTANT

Farming is Wisconsin's number one industry. By some estimates, agriculture injects \$40 billion into the state's economy each year. Dairy farming and processing alone contribute \$20 billion per year. Support for farming is key to the state's prosperity. While global markets and federal programs certainly have a major impact on farming, local governments also have a role in seeing that local land use plans support and do not undermine the industry.

Farming is one of the most important land uses in the state. Farmland makes up nearly half of the state's 34.8 million acres. Keeping this land in farming is crucial for several reasons. Farming is an appropriate and productive use of rural land. Good stewardship on farmland protects surrounding natural resources, provides habitat for wildlife, and provides recharge for groundwater.

Farm families are mainstays of a community, with a sense of history and place, as well as the core of many communities' economic foundation. As major landowners, farmers pay property taxes that support schools and other services used by non-farmers. Farmers can best communicate what they face as problems and what they need from the community to prosper.

FARMERS MUST GET THEIR MESSAGE ACROSS

Many people who are not farmers still have strong feelings about farmland. They may see farms as land waiting to serve a different use such as residential housing or a golf course. Others see farms as simply "green space" worthy of preservation and nothing more. They fail to appreciate that farms are places of business that must change in response to technological innovation and market challenges. Land use plans must promote farms as businesses, in addition to preserving them as significant resources.

As the number of farmers and farms shrink, it is getting harder for the interests of farmers to compete with the voices of developers,

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and a community's majority of non-farming citizens. Comprehensive planning offers the forum for farmers to have meaningful input into a community's land use plan.

Farmers can remind local officials and planners why a community should care about farming and call attention to the problems facing local farmers. Who else but farmers can best help communities recognize that their land use policies play a critical role in determining the future of farming? Farmers can point out the direct and indirect benefits of farming. By simply giving a tour of a well-run facility, farmers can show non-farmers how large farm operations can be good stewards and good neighbors.

Farmers can encourage communities to give farmland preservation the highest priority. This commitment in the form of a strong plan will guide a community's actions in the future. Farmers should make the case that they deserve the same active support as any other industry that serves the community. Communities should be encouraged to take actions that uphold the right to farm by reasonably addressing concerns such as odor, expansion, and traffic.

With a push from farmers, communities can take some simple steps to support farm businesses. Zoning changes that permit value-added operations such as cheese or yogurt making, on- and off-farm direct retailing (roadside farm stands), and road signs to attract potential business to farms are just a few ways communities can help support local farms.

With economic development in mind, communities can do many positive things to stimulate the farm economy. They can explore financial incentives to expand the farm infrastructure by providing low interest loans to processing plants or applying for transportation grants to improve roads. They can support a local farmer's market or encourage restaurants and retailers to buy from area farms. A town or city that maintains a healthy economic base will be able to support the kinds of services upon which farming depends, such as implement dealers, feed stores, and veterinarians.

Comprehensive planning can also help communities tackle emerging issues. Communities need to prepare for changes farmers must make to keep their operations profitable. Low-income workers employed by modern livestock operations may need housing and other social services.

PARTICIPATION OPENS DOORS

By participating in the planning process, farmers will be exposed to a variety of issues that determine their future. They will inevitably build stronger ties with others in the community. Non-farmers will come to better understand the contributions and needs of farmers in their area. This will help in building complete communities that recognize the need for farmland and farming as part of their future.

But without farmer participation, such as serving on citizen planning committees, it is less likely that local land use plans will recognize and protect farm interests.

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